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SUBJECT: GEORGIA: PRE-ELECTION TRIP TO AKHALKALAKI,
JAVAKHETI REGION

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Poloff visited the Armenian minority region of Akhalkalaki in Javakheti December 18-19 to gauge the pre-election mood of the political parties, NGOs, press and general populace in the lead-up to the January 5 snap Presidential elections. This impoverished region traditionally gives strong support to incumbent parties and this election is no exception. There are fewer outward signs of campaigning here, especially by the opposition, than in other regions. To date, none of the candidates have visited Akhalkalaki. The opposition claims support for Saakashvili is driven by fear of reprisals for opposing him, and by the ruling party's inappropriate use of administrative resources. Saakashvili's supporters point instead to his accomplishments in the last four years, especially in improving the region's infrastructure. End Summary.

The United National Movement

¶2. (SBU) The UNM representative Hamlet Movsesyan listed the improvements in the Akhalkalaki region under Saakashvili's government: construction of a 70 kilometer new road from Akhaltsikhe to Akhalkalaki; the Millennium Challenge Project of building a road from Akhalkalaki through Tsalka to Tbilisi; refurbishment of new schools; opening of a new vocational school; construction of a natural gas pipeline which will bring gas to all sectors of the city over the next three years; and regular electricity and payment of salaries to government employees. Movsesyan said locals are personally affected by the bad relationship between Georgia and Russia as many have relatives in Russia and can no longer visit there due to the visa regime now in place. With regards to NATO, he said that generally residents are negative about NATO membership as they have little information about the organization. He discounted that there would be confusion on Election Day about where residents should vote as a result of the increase in the number of Precinct Election Commissions (PEC), saying the location of the precincts was widely broadcast on the local television channel. He commented that Opposition candidates were not actively working in the region and as a result the population is not aware of their platforms.

Akhalkalaki Governor

¶3. (SBU) Artur Yeremenyan, Akhalkalaki District Governor, focused on the accomplishments of the Saakashvili administration in the region, highlighting many of the same points as Movsesyan. He said that the vouchers for fire-wood, flour and some packages of food-stuffs as well as New Year's greeting letters from the Acting President are

being distributed by Saakashvili's headquarters, even though Tbilisi sends them to the local administration. Yeremenyan said problems still remain in Akhalkalaki, but the local government is moving forward through strong cooperation with NGOs, shifting the emphasis from humanitarian efforts to development. He was uncertain whether election-related materials would be translated into Armenian. Yeremenyan stressed the issue of bad relations with Russia could be effectively used by Saakashvili's opponents for "Black PR."

New Rightists

¶4. (SBU) New Rightists representative Armen Farmanian, and Giorgi Nikolaishvili told Poloffs that their candidate has not yet been to Akhalkalaki, but plans on making an appearance on December 21. They said that they had been unable to use the Cultural Center as a venue as they were told by the local government that the structure was under repair. The New Rights representatives focused on the negative aspects of life in Akhalkalaki: unemployment due to the closure of the Russian base; the fear that NATO would station Turkish troops at the former Russian military site; intimidation by local authorities as to the consequences of not voting for Saakashvili; and voters being asked to give up their IDs to local authorities. Both were convinced that these IDs would be used in some capacity to falsify votes, but they could not explain how. Farmanian noted that one of the newly created PECs would be located in a private building, and the owner was very much against it.

United Opposition Council

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¶5. (SBU) United Opposition Council representative Otar Iagurashvili, Republican party, and Giorgi Elibegov, Freedom party, told Poloffs that they were having no success in reaching the local electorate as they were being watched by the local police and residents were afraid to approach them. They had noted the plate numbers and passed them to David Usupashvili. Both relayed to Poloff that the local council was slow to answer their requests for where they were allowed to hang their election placards and banners. They echoed the comments of the New Rightist party representatives in that they too were told by local officials that the Cultural Center was not available as a venue due to repairs (ref para 4). Both representatives had traveled to meet Poloff that very day from Tbilisi and it did not seem that they had dedicated office space and an organized plan. Elibegov stressed the importance of permitting voters to vote on the day of elections. He was deeply concerned that voter's lists were inaccurate and if someone's name was not on the list, he would not be permitted to vote.

European Center for NGOs

¶6. (SBU) Poloffs met with local NGOS representatives at the European Center for NGOs. Most of the discussion centered around regional issues, not the Presidential election. All NGOs shared complaints about lack of employment, lack of status of the Armenian language as a regional administrative language, lack of local government autonomy from the center, and construction by the federal government of a prison near Ninotsminda which they allege was not coordinated with the local government prior to construction. Their concern was that Georgians, ostensibly family members of the prisoners, would move to the region, thereby changing the demographics. With regards to the elections, most all said that locals cannot take part in the local political process. If they would support the opposition it would bring them personal

misfortune, as it would be certain, in their eyes, to bring disfavor from the local authorities who would treat them like traitors. One NGO spokesman said, "None of us here participated in the protests in Tbilisi, because we knew that this would cause us nothing but problems. As a minority in Georgia we have enough problems." One in the group alleged that local authorities advised him not to attend the roundtable.

Press Roundtable

¶7. (SBU) Press representatives told Poloff that they were frustrated with the lack of information that was available in Russian or Armenian about the candidates' platforms. None of the candidates had visited the city, and as far as they knew, none of them were addressing minority issues. Some of them expressed concern that voters were being intimidated, and had little faith in reporting it to the authorities.

Comment

¶8. (SBU) Traditionally, minorities in the region have voted for the ruling party. In the past the majority of them have voted for Gamsakhurdia, Shevardnadze, and Saakashvili. Although sentiments run high in the region as to the importance of their language and need for self-autonomy, when it comes to the polls they typically vote the party line. None of the opposition candidates have addressed minorities concerns in their platforms, which could either indicate that they are not of importance to them as potential voters, or more likely that their campaign energies may yield better fruit elsewhere given the region's typical voting record.

TEFFT